

Tracking Self into Place

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Abstract

In an effort to figure out what it means to educate “ecologically,” I decided to track down some of the stories that I was living, telling, and making as an educator. I ended up lost in the house of environmental education, stuck within the rooms of ecological science and political advocacy. Outside on the lawn sat the story of place-based education. As I listened to the story of place, I began to embrace complexity and wonder as pedagogical tools in my practice. Come join me as I attempt to track myself into place.

Résumé

Dans l'espoir de comprendre le sens de l'expression « éducation écologique », j'ai décidé de réunir certaines des anecdotes que j'ai vécues, racontées et inventées dans mes fonctions d'éducateur. J'ai fini par me perdre dans le labyrinthe de l'éducation environnementale, coincé entre la galerie de la science écologique et la cavité de la défense des droits politiques. Dehors sur le gazon se déroulait l'histoire de l'éducation axée sur le lieu physique. En écoutant cette histoire du lieu, j'ai commencé à saisir l'utilité de la complexité et de l'émerveillement à titre d'outils dans mon travail. Accompagnez-moi dans mon voyage de ressourcement.

Keywords: personal narrative, complexity, wonder, place consciousness, environmental education

Hi there, can you do me a favour? In a moment, place the book down and notice the place¹ around you. How does the ground feel beneath your feet? Are there smells that drift around you? What about the sounds nearby? How does all of this affect you? Is there a place you would rather be? What does that place look like and why is it more appealing? Take some time now and when you are ready, pick up the book again.

Welcome back! What did you notice? Now let me explain myself: as you will soon find out, my practice as an educator concentrates on the power of place. I don't have the ability to take you outside into the local land and community, but I can embrace the power of the place we find ourselves in right now: here we are able to share stories. We can learn from them, cultivate them, change them, and maybe even abandon some. In that vein, I plan to tell you a story of mine. As I tell it, you may find that it sparks connections for you about something in your own life, your own practice. When you feel that spark, hear that story of yours that is related to mine, it is my hope that you will stop reading and find a friend—or better yet, a stranger—and tell them a story. For

example, later on, when I describe some teachers that I have worked with, feel free to go tell someone about a similar teacher that you had when you were five and how he changed your life and how his name was Mr. Russell. Then, for that person listening to you, that might remind them of their uncle Russell who incidentally had six toes, and so on. I invite you to break up the reading and share your stories as they arise. This paper will be here when you are ready to come back to it.

Tracking Lessons

Let me tell you about the spot I am in right now. It is springtime and I am down by the Oldman River in southern Alberta. The Plains Cottonwood trees have new waxy leaves on their branches and the scent of their sweet sap is carried on the warm wind. The sun hits the leaves and the trees become a vertical bed of clapping light. I have been following deer tracks in the mud along the riverbank. There are some fawn tracks amongst the larger prints and a few dried coyote tracks that lead down to the gravel bed, where I lose sight of them.

Tracking has been an important learning tool throughout my life. I have learned to listen to what the presence of sand under my feet has to tell me of an ancient lake. I have danced my way between smooth rocks that are singing signs of the quick-moving currents of an old stream bed. I have rediscovered how the land is filled with tracks of intricate relationships—it is just a matter of having the time and space to notice them. The more stories I find, the more that emerge. In an effort to figure out what it means to educate ecologically, I recently decided to track down some of the stories I was living, telling, and making as an environmental educator.

I followed my worn path to the house of environmental education. Here my tracks seemed to be split into two rooms, one occupied by the story of ecological science and the other belonging to social and political advocacy. I wandered into the large room belonging to the story of ecological science. I looked around the room in shock. I had spent a lot of time trying to keep things neat and tidy and in order in this room. Now the walls were covered in mold, and ants carefully crawled around tangled spider webs. In one corner, a scientist sat scribbling, documenting the change. Parts of the walls were crumbling, returning to the earth, and plants were peeking out of the cracks.

The change reminded me of succession, that familiar concept in which forest growth progresses in a strict, unidirectional manner toward a definite end: a stable “climax” community that meets a harmonious balance. This “balance of nature” metaphor is still taught as a fundamental axiom of ecology, even though scientists have moved on to a “flux of nature” perspective (Pickett, Kolasa, & Jones, 2007, p. 199). When I taught succession as an ecological educator, whether I was on the west coast or in the Rockies or in the boreal forest, the diagrams were always the same straight line. I never included the effects of fire or flood, or

how changes in climate could affect what grew where. Change was a blip along the way to balance, never a guiding principle itself.

For me, the balance metaphor, with its pretence of self-regulation, fit so neatly into environmental education pedagogy as a convenient argument against human-created disturbances such as logging, which would clearly disrupt the “balance” (Bennetta, as cited in Korfiatis, 2005). I hadn’t even considered that a drastically different view could be derived from the very same metaphor: that all human impacts within nature could be dismissed because everything would return to a “balance.” Such polar ethical decisions can still be made, even with the more complex “state of flux” metaphor that exists today. When change is the guiding principle rather than stability, all human disturbances can either be justified as part of this change or in stark contrast—in which case we should be even more cautious of our impacts (Des Jardins, 2005).

By selling my version of ecological science to my students as a cure-all, I had mistaken it as a way to find clear and certain truths. I was hoping my students and I would move like the plants in my model, in a simple trajectory to a harmonious balance with nature. In order to guide us quickly to definite answers, I made futile attempts to control and hide the elephant of complexity. Traditional ecological science provides us with a provisional and evolving story, yet I had unfairly been looking to it as a simple blueprint on the proper way to interact with nature. Now, after tracking myself back into this story, I stood on one side of the room frantically cleaning the walls, clinging to the promise of a clear and simple reality and a static, balanced state. And on the other side of the room sat the scientist, the ants, and the mold, and the acceptance that the world is non-linear and complex. The number and nature of all possible interactions within one ecosystem is inconceivable; clearly we cannot possibly expect ecological science to identify and describe all of them and then inform us of how to proceed in all of those relationships. But we do! And we often teach our students to expect the same.

I definitely never indicated to my students the possibility that the balance metaphor could be wrong. This model has been rejected by contemporary ecologists due to the outdated assumptions that natural systems are closed, self-regulating, unidirectional, fixed, and stable (Pickett & Ostfeld, 1995). The new state of flux model looks at the landscape as a “shifting mosaic,” rather than a static state (Pickett & Ostfeld, 1995). The state of flux metaphor means that natural disturbances and ecological processes, such as fire or erosion, will result in a constantly transforming landscape and this change will occur at various spatial and temporal scales that humans may not be able to understand or see. As Jason Simus (2009) describes: “The apparent regularity or randomness, balance or imbalance, order or disorder, is relative to scale—the rate, intensity, and extent to which changes in natural systems occur. Ecosystems are neither perfectly integrated nor totally chaotic” (p. 13). Within ecological science, the conception of wilderness has moved from a discrete entity to a complex, living

process (Pickett, Parker, & Fielder, 1992). I realized that educating ecologically meant embracing the complexity that this new model entailed, but how?

I bid farewell to the story of ecological science and followed my tracks into an adjoining room. As soon as I entered this room I ran to the windows and flung them open and yelled down at the neighbours. "Look at all your garbage, it's a disgrace! Put your cat inside! Don't you know that we live in the habitat of migratory songbirds?" I retracted from the window after the words had left my mouth, unsure of what had just happened until I realized that I now occupied the room of social and political-based advocacy.

The seriousness of environmental issues (such as global warming or deforestation) makes it very tempting to treat environmental education as a program designed to recruit students to adopt particular solutions, analyses, and actions. We advise our students that "you *should* turn off the lights," "you *shouldn't* idle your car," "*do* recycle," and "*don't* litter." In my experience, such a top-down approach does not give students a deep or felt understanding as to why the behaviour is important and, as a result, actions are often short-lasting and superficial. Because of this, some have argued that environmental education should take a "value-free" approach, suggesting that any value position should be dealt with through family, church, or state, rather than the school. But this could result in the opposite extreme, where teachers resort to "relativism" and all views are interpreted as valid and equal and no decision can be made. In this regard, Clifford Knapp (1999) argues that "the dangers of environmental destruction are real, so what do students learn if educators never take a stance on critical issues?" (pp. 18-19). As the neighbours hurled their garbage at me it became clear that I needed to steer clear of telling people to care for the environment, and instead give them the opportunity to develop their own meaningful connections and hopefully, a related environmental ethic.

My tracks paced in circles between these two rooms and I soon became exhausted, trying to figure out why I didn't just stick with one story. So I flung open the door to the house of environmental education and went outside to sit on the lawn. As I sat there, I began to realize just how long I had been in that house and lost in those two stories. Yet, I was still unsure as to why I didn't quite feel comfortable telling them. The stories of ecological science and political advocacy swirled around my head. Soon though, they grew quiet, and I was left to listen to the grass. I felt the wind pick up and snake its way through the land, hitting my face in icy waves, carrying memories of the glacial water that once carved out the valley. I was captivated watching the grass blades bend and then rise back up again under the curving edge of the wind. I marvelled at how, despite such a strong wind, the small blades of grass simply danced back and forth. Then it struck me: it was because the grass was rooted in place! I realized that the stories of ecological science and political advocacy that I had been telling had been sitting *on* the land, instead of having roots *within* it.

As an environmental educator, I had been telling generalized stories that

could have taken place inside just as easily as outside. Time after time, my version of environmental education consisted of a string of activities: running games, simple scavenger hunts, dusty bird mounts, and the odd captive turtle, all of which contributed little or nothing to developing meaningful relationships with the actual place we were in. Playing beavers running back and forth across an empty field, with hoola hoops as water bodies, collecting plastic food chips: what does one really remember about the place? Neglecting to root my stories in place fit with my cultural context: a Western worldview that treated place as an objectified other, as a backdrop to learning instead of a focus for it (Plumwood, 1993). The stories my culture speaks sweep through the land but rarely are born of it, so it is no wonder they can be easily forgotten. I started tracking down new stories, ones that were rooted in the complexity of place.

How many of you have used hoola hoops as habitat? Or taught a linear model of forest succession? Have you shared a story yet...? Go ahead, I'll wait.

Educating for Complexity

I soon tracked my way to the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and found myself working as an ecological educator at Kananaskis Field Station, operated by the University of Calgary. Here, I learned a whole new way to approach ecological science by embedding it in the context, change, and subjective experience of place. For a course on aquatic life, we would provide students with the River Continuum Concept, a model that provides a guide on what invertebrates one can expect to find in a stream, based on the size of the stream and the surrounding trees/vegetation. In class, the students made their predictions and then we took them down to the creek. To their shock, they realized that the creek was in the middle of a gravel floodplain, with no trees or vegetation nearby. The model no longer worked. Students remarked that they hadn't even considered the fact that there could be no trees. The model had set the limits of understanding with its hidden presupposition of a set context. By applying the framework to a particular place, the limits of such a generalized scientific model became evident. The importance of considering context became clear. On some visits to the creek, students would not only find out there were no trees, but also that there was almost no creek! In times of low flow, the creek would slip back through the rocks and flow underground. As a result, the students became aware of the importance of change, whether it was the disappearing stream or the movement of the earth that made it difficult to do repeat trials measuring light or temperature levels, as the sun was in a different position as the day wore on. As the context and changes were noted, the students also realized that they *themselves* were impacting their study. From the temperature of their own bodies to the spot they chose along the stream, their own actions and decisions were having an impact on what they perceived. They became their own "data," and realized that they were active subjects in the story of place. We were

beginning to regain a sense of complexity of the earth—specifically, we realized the importance of non-linearity, context, change, and subjectivity (Gorke, 2003). I have since been experimenting with using these four aspects of complexity as cornerstones for “place as pedagogy” (Gruenewald, 2003; Lewicki, 1997).

Webs of Wonder

Through my experiences as an ecological educator, and through my work with some teachers on Bowen Island, British Columbia, I explored this complexity within my practice as an educator. Just like the scientist puts limits on the focus of the study, I realized that as the “educator,” I am now the person who sets the limits, to a large degree, on what gets asked, what gets answered, and what gets experienced. As I reflected on my practice, I realized I was often seeking simple and quick explanations to questions from my students. Then, upon delivering a quick answer, I could see the spark of wonder within the student quickly switch to indifference. I became keenly aware of my ability to both “illuminate and insulate” through the way I framed learning opportunities, and decided to try to move away from the direct question-and-answer routine (Van Matre, 1974).

I began to tap into the importance of wonder as a learning tool within my practice. The world is inscribed with tracks into wonder, but most of us as adults have forgotten how to read or even find them. Working with the teachers on Bowen Island, I often heard them use the phrase “I wonder...”. Such a phrase alleviates our cultural expectations surrounding “teacher” and “student” and instead treats everyone as co-learners (Van Matre, 1979). One morning, after exploring the forest behind the school, one teacher shared how the experience and the questions from students had sparked a new wonder for her: “Where do slugs go in the winter?” She also encouraged students to record some of their own wonders in their journals. Such moments have helped me learn to discard the assumption that my questions as an educator have to be simple, and/or that I have to know the answers to them myself! I have also found that “It depends...” is a great way to draw out possibilities for linking the wonder at hand to its nest of contingent relationships. For example, to answer the question, “I wonder how old crabs get to be?” I began to answer, “That depends on many things such as...” and the group would throw back answers: “if the crab has lots of predators nearby, it might die when it is just a baby,” or, “if it has lots of food nearby, it will probably be stronger,” or, “if it has a good place to hide, it could avoid predators and live longer.” In this way, we realize that one wonder is contingent on many other relations. I hope that by starting this process, it will lead to a sense that the world is too complex and large to ever be completely understood. We need to learn to accept this ambiguity and this unknown as part of being human. Instead of guiding students to concretely answer an isolated wonder, I hope to help learners become aware of the contingency within their questions or the webs around their wonders. This

requires that we think not in terms of quick and simple answers, but instead revel in the multiplicity and plurality of relationships, processes, patterns, and context. If we educated for complexity without including wonder, learners might be left feeling confused and powerless. At the same time, if we emphasized wonder without embedding it in our relations with place, then we would feel equally overwhelmed and helpless. Instead, by spinning webs of wonder into an embodied connection with place, we are left inspired! In this way we feel and grow into the very complex relationships of place and experience that give our lives meaning.

Felt those webs of wonder with your students? More stories arising? Feel free to email me at piersol@wildmail.com and share them.

A Place of Caring

Place-based pedagogy fosters deep relationships with all others, superseding the need for deontological ethics. I remember a boy who spent most of his free time at the Field Station, sitting under a tree near a bird feeder. One morning we gathered for class and I saw that he was still sitting under the tree. As I approached, I saw a bird dead on the ground. I knew he would be upset, so I began talking to him about the cycle of life. After talking for a while, he turned to me and said, “I feel very sad, almost like a part of me had died.” Thich Nhat Hahn (1992) describes this as “interbeing”: “‘To be’ is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone” (p. 95). Through awareness of such “inter-being,” one is deeply interconnected with the other and responds not out of necessity or deemed responsibility, but out of compassion (Bai & Banack, 2006, p. 14). As students become connected to place and community, they develop a “felt” responsibility that guides their ethics in relation to one another and the earth (Bai & Banack, 2006). The dangers of relativism are no longer relevant because students develop this sense of inter-being (connected to a web of relations), and this caring space can guide them in their way through critical social, economic, and political issues (Hahn, 1992).

A profound example of the power of such a way of being was noted by anthropologist Keith Basso. He found that for the Western Apache, “selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined” (Basso, 1986, p. 114). For the Apache, morality is found in stories about local places and so the land remains a constant reminder of how to live and relate to others. Through such place-based connections, we dissolve the perceived subject/object dualism and feel that we are deeply inscribed in our relation to all others; whatever we do to the world, we do to ourselves. Feeling part of a non-linear world is to be cautious and aware of the unpredictable results of our actions.

Through connection to place, we can renew a lived sense of non-linearity, context, contingency, subjectivity, and change to foster this sense of inter-being. There are many different ways to create space for such an experience with stu-

dents. I have experimented with tracking, role play, questing, sensory awareness, storytelling, and journaling among others. The pedagogical tools I developed and tried out were themselves still subject to complexity and, as a result, could not be clearly mapped out. It was impossible to focus on one aspect of complexity without also having others present. For example, in a seashore program that I taught, we used a micro scale to track *changes* using sensory exploration (which would *embody* these changes) and by tracking one spot, students were relating to the particular *context* of their place. By entering role plays to increase *subjectivity*, we attempted to see the world in a different *context* (through the eyes of an “other”) and had to *change* the way we normally related with the world. Tracking as a learning tool helped us *feel* a part of historical context and experience *changes* over time, whether it was minutes or years. By using connection to place as guiding pedagogy, we were always immersed in the subjective, ever-changing, and context-specific complexity of our situated relations.

I had included myself as a subject within the earth’s complexity but never fully considered just how much my practice as an educator is already a subject to context and change, and full of subjectivity. I didn’t have to *add* these concepts so much as *embrace* them. Instead of trying to control or deny the non-linear and emergent process of facilitating learning, I had to learn how to dance within it. I have become aware of assumptions (both personal and cultural) that have been limiting my perception and my relations with the world. Such limits have not only been revealed to me, I have *felt* their constraints and tried to recover the opportunities for relating and learning that were hidden within. I have tried to shift into embracing a non-linear way of knowing and being, learning that I “will not graduate from the world but into its significance” (Shepard, 1982, p. 9).

Earth as Teacher

Of course, we must carefully choose the stories that we root ourselves in. The concept of “place” cannot and should not be universalized. Not all place connections are great; some are filled with suffering and pain. This is why as educators, we need to be cognizant of our context, ever listening to the places and people with whom we live, and ensuring that the place-based connections we are promoting are ones that help the natural world and the communities within it flourish. To avoid a narcissistic and parochial view of the world, the connections must also be nested in the context of a global citizenship. We can learn to use place as a co-teacher, not to the exclusion of other places or stories, but as a focal point to re-engage in the natural world at our doorstep.

There are also dangers in over-romanticizing place, akin to those of the “balance of nature” metaphor where we mistakenly assume that because we “know” place we can derive a conception of the “natural order” of that place and therefore delineate exactly what should be ethically permissible there (Simus, 2009). Part and parcel of getting out from under this dilemma is the com-

plexity piece, realizing that although place can be a teacher, we can't assume to know all of its lessons.

Now when I am planning programs, I begin by going to the place in which I will be teaching. This may sound obvious, but in the past I have done most of my planning inside, recalling the place as best I could remember. As David Gruenewald (2003) points out: "A fundamental paradox of place... is that although we can experience it everywhere it recedes from consciousness as we become engrossed in our routines in space and time" (p. 622). Now I make it my intention to go and listen to the place, to bring the natural world back into the foreground of my teaching. I always notice things I would have missed if all my planning had been done indoors. In the tradition of natural historians such as Aldo Leopold, I try to ask, "What can the sky, earth, and water tell me about what has happened in this very spot?" Keeping in mind that what we discover is only part of a complex web, we are able to not only discover tangible signs of the past, but also uncover a sense of being actively engaged and embedded in the stories that they present. I have learned to look to place and community as teacher, as an active storyteller within my practice. As Ben Okri (1997) says:

We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 46)

How many stories have you shared so far? I included that initial invitation to share stories as a way to incorporate place as pedagogy. I tried to take into account the context of place by inviting everyone to track their subjective experience into this changing story and thus embrace the non-linear, complex relations that exist even in this intangible space between writer and reader! We are able to move away from abstract descriptions and prescriptions to a more meaningful, tangible sense of our inscription in place. When I began this process of tracking the guiding narratives in my life, I had initially thought that I could master and solve this problem of what it means to educate ecologically. I thought that the tracks would lead me to an end. Instead, the tracks of place-based education never lead me to an answer, *they* are the answer: to educate ecologically is an ever-evolving story, the complex intertwining of self and place. As we merge with place, we learn to articulate the stories that give meaning to our lives. The power to share such stories means we are able to strike the deepest chords of being, uncover our buried melodies, and hum them back to the earth from which they came.

Now come enter a place with me. Pay attention and see if you can track down the context specific, contingent, dynamic, and subjective concepts of place. They are always there; the clues abound.

Gone Home

I arrive in twilight and step onto shore. The sun has been shining all afternoon.

And I know this because the rock warms the arc of each foot.

The moon looks out onto the land like the eye of a fish, its silver light constantly occluded by moving scales of cloud, bringing brown and black swirling patterns into view. It is mid-July.

And I know this because the clouds peel back to reveal the stars of the seven sisters hanging over a bent pine. In fall, this cluster of stars will sit perched above the roof of the cabin.

I watch the moonlight reflected from the water form dancing ribs of light that travel up and down the skin of the rock, dissolving form into fluid. The water level in the lake has gone down.

And I know this because last year I watched the waves roll over this spot, revealing the wet rock dripping like black paint. This rock scoops down to form a small basin. It forms a perfect round pool of still water and holds the moon where it once held a child.

And I know this because my father has told me that he was bathed here as a baby.

I can hear the frogs calling from the nearby pond, their many voices layered high and low landing on the boughs of the pine. It will rain soon.

And I know this because I can hear a soft trill of tree frogs among the chorus. I have grown up listening to their flute-like call woven through raindrops, rolled into liquid melody and memory.

The rain begins to fall, sending streaming bullets that burst and shoot into the air as they reach the ground. The lake begins to hum and through this steady beat I see a heron standing straight, silhouetted against the shore. It lands atop a giant old pine. I watch and listen and learn.

This I do not know,

This feeling of feet grasping swaying branch

Towering high above the singing lake,

Covered in currents of warm air swept up from the sun-baked rock

Breathing in the sweet scent of juniper

While the rain slides off you in all directions.

This I do not know...

Notes

- ¹ Place in this article refers to Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) conception of it as a collection of intimate experiences and relations separated from the undifferentiated space that surrounds it.

Notes on Contributor

Laura Piersol has most recently been tracking/educating along the banks of the Oldman River in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. She has returned to the Fraser River Watershed to pursue a PhD in ecological education at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include place-conscious education and eco-semiotics. **Contact:** piersol@wildmail.com

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